AREA HANDBOOK
for
COSTA RICA

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ely homogeneous nature of the society makes for a degree of ...mony not usually found in cultures composed of more widely diverse elements; race is no problem, and the ethnic elements of the population are not sufficiently dissimilar to result in minorities with special aims and interests (see Population, Ethnic Groups, ch. 4). There are no marked contrasts of poverty and wealth and no significant class tension, and there has been no traditional ruling elite or oligarchy since the 19th century. Widespread landownership has imparted a sense of equality and individualism, resulting in a relatively open society with a high degree of social mobility.

Labor, while organized on a fairly wide basis, is not aggressive or militant. Total union membership is approximately 25,000. Latest government statistics, published in 1968 for the year 1966, indicated that there were 216 unions, a drop from 360 of the previous year. About one quarter of the unions are agricultural, with the strongest on the banana plantations. The national labor code, first adopted in 1943, is modern and comprehensive, and prescribes minimum wages and working conditions. It provides effective arbitration and conciliation procedures and, as a result, strikes and lockouts have normally been kept to a minimum.

Although the Communists have made a number of attempts in the past to dominate the labor movement, their efforts have been increasingly ineffectual. With a small number of notable exceptions the country's labor force has been tractable, cooperative, and orderly (see Agriculture, Industry, Labor, ch. 9). There was a high degree of cooperation between workers and employers. An increasing number of cooperatives was being formed, in contrast to the dissolution of a number of the smaller unions.

Around the turn of the century the activities of some student groups caused them to be looked on as centers of agitation and disorder; but with the stable development of the country in the first half of the 20th century, there was a steady decrease in student participation in politics. This trend is starting to be reversed, but it is reflected in a growing youthful interest that has generally taken on a cooperative and constructive cast. Interest in national affairs was pointed up at the Congress of Students held in the capital in early 1969. Older observers were particularly impressed by the intelligent discussion of national problems and the proposal of genuine solutions.

There has also been increased participation in the National Youth Movement, a domestic organization of several thousand young people that devotes itself to constructive projects furthering the social and economic development of the society. The organization celebrated its fourth anniversary in April 1969 at the University of Costa Rica. The conclave was attended by the president of the republic, who ... the group and their orderly and constructive efforts. Some disaffection, however, has begun to make itself felt. In mid-1969 the economics students at the university went on strike demanding the elimination of final examinations as a requirement for a degree.

The Roman Catholic Church as an institution is not a factor in the country's political life. The Constitution declares the apostolic Roman Catholic faith to be the nation's official state religion, but it also precludes the clergy from holding any high political office. An overwhelming majority of Costa Ricans are Catholics, but the Church itself has traditionally abstained from political activity. For the most part church-state relations have been harmonious, and what tensions have occurred over the years were the result of religious rather than secular activities. In general, the Church has tried to serve as a moderating and mediating influence in national affairs.

One uncharacteristic episode took place in 1969 when the curia in San José forbade clerics from marching in the May Day labor parade, allegedly fearing possible political involvement. The ban was decried in most quarters as unwarranted interference by the Church officials in what was considered a display of support for labor, which had no political connotations. Although the ban remained in effect, a number of liberal younger priests took part in the march (see Religion, ch. 5).

The Free Costa Rica Movement (Movimiento Costa Rica Libre—MCRL) was in 1969 an anti-Communist group, which had a membership of prominent citizens from all walks of life and all major political parties. It was organized along paramilitary lines and was known to be the most heavily armed group in the country.

The MCRL was outspoken in its denunciation of communism and had taken a strong stand against registration of an alleged Communist-front political party, threatening to adopt a "combative policy" if the Communists were permitted to participate in politics through a front organization. Conversely, the University Student Congress in early 1969 accused the MCRL of being a military group and recommended that it be dissolved by the government. Although the movement has always stayed within strictly legal bounds and has demonstrated no opposition to the government, it is considered by many to be a potential danger to the country's democratic institutions.

Whereas no distinct segment or element was particularly influential or disruptive and the general atmosphere was one of peace and stability, dissatisfaction with the status quo was demonstrated in widespread reform movements; and in 1969 the country was in the process of revising the Constitution, the penal code, and the electoral code. The stabilizing factor, however, was that differences were